

Prayer and Scriptures

National Catholic News Service
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December 26, 1983

The Scriptures have often been called "the living word" because they have a unique way of gripping a person and opening a door to an intense and personal relationship with God.

This mysterious and yet undeniably common experience of relationship to God through the Scriptures has slowly become integrated into the most fundamental rhythms of the prayer life of the Church.

The earliest followers of Christ, or the desert Fathers, were fond of memorizing all the psalms. They often prayed the entire book of psalms in a single day.

As the Church evolved its monastic communities, the psalms became divided into seven different groups so that the book of psalms were prayed over an entire week instead of in a single day.

St Benedict arranged the psalms so that they moved from those appropriate for the beginning of a day to those better suited to the end of the day. The seven daily offices are called: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, and Matins.

Prayers from the New Testament were also integrated into the Divine Office. The Benedictus, or prayer of Simeon upon seeing the Christ child, is prayed every morning at Lauds; and the Magnificat, or prayer of Mary at the greeting of Elizabeth, is prayed every evening at Vespers.

St. Benedict believed that a monk or nun would find the prayer of the Scriptures to be a constant wellspring of life in God. At the beginning of his Rule for Monasteries he said: "Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up."

Most men and women who live a religious vocation outside of a monastic enclosure pray what is called "The Liturgy of the Hours". This further adaptation of the prayer of the church spreads the book of psalms over a four week period.

For the desert fathers who prayed the psalms in a day, or the contemplatives who pray them in a week, or for others who pray them over four weeks, the experience of sharing continuously in the prayers of David, Solomon, Simeon, Mary, and Christ becomes a replenishing foundation of relationship with God.

A second way in which Scriptures have become integrated into communal prayer is in the liturgy of the Mass.

Everyone is aware of the specific section of the Mass called the "Liturgy of the Word" which includes readings from the Old Testament, from the letters of St. Paul, and from the Gospels.

However, there are many other places in the Mass which integrate Scripture into prayer. Here are some examples:

The beginning of the "Glory to God in the Highest, and peace to his people on earth" is taken from the words of the angels addressed to the shepherds at the birth of Christ.

The end of the Sanctus or "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest" comes from the words which greeted Christ riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The ~~words~~ of consecration of the bread and wine are taken from Christ's prayer in the upper room on Holy Thursday when the eucharist was first celebrated.

Another prayer taken directly from Christ's own words is the Our Father which is not only prayed in the Mass but also at every office of the prayer of the Church.

Finally, the Agnus Dei, is found in the words of John the Baptist when he said to his disciples: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

There is also another way in which the Scriptures frequently relate to prayer. This involves the personal use of the Bible for guidance and inspiration.

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We are told that Christ himself went to the temple: "He stood up to read and they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll he found the place where it is written: The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me."

After he returned to his seat he then said: "This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen." The belief that a passage from Scriptures has a specific meaning for a person or community is often found in Church history.

St. Augustine in his Confessions tells us that hearing a particular passage from the Bible brought about his decision to convert to Christianity.

Many people read a passage from the Bible before praying in silence in order to focus their attention on God in a specific way.

Some families and religious communities "open Scripture" and read a passage together in order to discuss its meaning in relation to their particular situation in the world.

If all of these ways then, in the Divine Office, in Mass, and in private lives Scriptures may indeed become a 'living word' in the sense that it has the potential to 'stir us up', to draw us closer to God, and to help us carry out our particular calls within the Church.